# OtherHand

## I concoct a theory….

**The Southerly Scenario**

I believe there are sometimes situations in which individuals can end up finding themselves in great peril without making grossly bad decisions. Fortunately it doesn't happen often, but I think it does happen. In the case of the Germans, it involves a series of honest mistakes that I myself could have made and ended up in a similar situation. But there is one piece of information that I, and many reading this would have, that Egbert didn't. And that piece of information probably would have changed the outcome.

There are some who will say that any backcountry travel in Death Valley using a normal street vehicle in Summer is inherently foolish. This is certainly a debatable topic. But it is well known that Summer in Death Valley does have a strong attraction for many European visitors (especially Germans), and every year many backcountry visits happen without incident. So for purposes of this discussion I will set aside the overall "reasonableness" of Summer travel in Death Valley and focus on specific actions.

Going into this, there are a couple of "big picture" parameters that should be kept in mind. First, their rental van was due back in Los Angeles on July 26, and they were returning to Germany the next day, the 27th.

Second, they may have been low on funds. The official reports indicate Egbert had some trouble getting money transferred to him earlier in the trip (i.e., San Clemente). He later requested additional money from his ex-wife, sent to him in Las Vegas. This didn't occur, so money was perhaps an issue as they planned to travel to Yosemite via Death Valley.

Arriving at the Visitor Center on the 22nd, they may have been looking for a route to see interesting Death Valley things, with the ultimate goal being Yosemite. But why would they head down West Side Road and not see the major DV attractions?

The Germans obviously knew that with valley floor temperatures reaching 124˚F they couldn't camp in the main valley, and low funds would have precluded renting a room at Furnace Creek. But the hot weather camping could be tolerable if they headed up a side canyon to make camp up and away from the valley floor where camping is not permitted. Perhaps they made inquiries about camping at the Visitors Center on the 22nd. Camping up a side canyon is supported by Emmett Harder's comment that he recognized in their developed photo roll a sunset view taken in Hanaupah Canyon. There's also water in the upper reaches of Hanaupah. Note that there aren't any camping opportunities on the east side of the valley, but several on the west. This could explain their choice of the West Side Road.

The maps they had available to them showed a route to the west, via Butte Valley and Mengel Pass, past the infamous Barker Ranch (Charles Manson's old hangout), then north to the ghost town of Ballarat and on to Yosemite. Possibly an entertaining route for the Germans if they knew the history of those locales. Their lack of familiarity with desert road conditions was obvious in the overall plan, but understandable. They had no real appreciation for how rugged routes like these could actually be, but there was probably some reasonable wariness on their part. But at a planning level, it made sense.

So at this point, we have the Germans up Hanaupah Canyon on the night of July 22nd. They would have successfully navigated a considerable number of dirt road miles on West Side Road, which may have lowered their guard as to potential hazards. They also made it up Hanaupah Canyon in their vehicle, no small achievement, which may have further bolstered their confidence as to backcountry traveling. And they had three nights left before they had to be back in Los Angeles. Just enough time for a quick trip through Yosemite, which they may have expected to reach by the next night, the 23rd.

So probably early on the morning of the 23rd, to beat the heat, they left Hanaupah Canyon and continued south to Warm Spring Road and turned west. They would have experienced a very fine dirt road at that point, validating their overall plan. Reaching the Warm Spring camp, they probably stopped because they thought it was an active settlement of some sort

(which is what it appears from the road) and to make inquiries as to road conditions further west, a reasonable course of action. Instead they found the Warm Spring camp deserted, and actually part of DVNP, so they signed the register, indicating they were going over the pass. This would have meant Mengel Pass. It also suggests a certain amount of caution and foresight, leaving a record should anything happen. Again, reasonable actions.

Continuing westerly toward Butte Valley, they encountered their first sections of truly questionable 2wd road. These segments would have been quite challenging, but aren't too lengthy. If Egbert was skillful enough to traverse them (and had taken out the collision damage waiver on the van!) he might have been put back at ease when reaching the relatively benign portions of road inside of Butte Valley. But by now they would have invested considerable time getting in there, thus the pressure to continue westward would have mounted.

Coming upon the Stone Cabin, it again would have looked like someone's home. It would be reasonable for them to stop and make another attempt to inquire about road conditions, but when doing so, found it empty and the cabin part of the park system. So on they continued (purloined flag in the van).

As they approached Mengel Pass it would have become apparent their vehicle was incapable of continuing. There was probably some foot scouting of the route, but it was obvious they had to turn back. Now there was a problem.

At this point it was probably late afternoon. Via Warm Spring Road it would have taken at least two hours for them to return to the paved road in the valley, and it was going opposite the direction they needed to go. The clock was working against them if they wanted to see Yosemite and be in LA on the 26th. Plus they already knew how bad portions of the road were between Butte Valley and Warm Spring and could not have not been looking forward to travelling over those segments again. However their pamphlet offered an (erroneous) alternative, apparently shorter route back down to the valley in the form of a road down Anvil Canyon. Although one should always be wary of the devil you know versus the devil you don't, it may have seemed a reasonable gamble. After all, they could always turn around if it got too bad and use Warm Spring Road instead, couldn't they?

So now it's late afternoon on the 23rd, and the Germans return to the intersection at the

Stone Cabin and turn right onto Anvil Canyon Road. This intersection is so obvious it's highly improbable they got confused and accidentally turned down Anvil Canyon. Striped Butte is both a massive landmark and guidepost, showing the way in and out of Butte Valley. The turn on to Anvil Canyon Road was likely premeditated and reasoned. And the first 1-1/2 miles until the mouth of the canyon are quite fine, validating their choice and perhaps lowering their guard. And even the portions after passing into the mouth of Anvil Canyon are reasonable….for a while.

But then Egbert would have quickly discovered he was driving more in a wash than on a road. And if you're used to driving a rear wheel drive vehicle (although the van was front wheel drive), and you come upon a sandy area, what do you do? You keep up your speed at all costs (i.e., you drive like hell!). The need to keep moving at a fast speed, plus the desire to get back to the main canyon ASAP likely contributed to driving much too fast for conditions, especially given their low slung vehicle. It was only a matter of time until rocks started taking out the rear tires. But given the front wheel drive aspect of the van, they may have been slowed but could still keep moving forward.

Most people who have been in that uncomfortable situation know that if you stop, it's difficult or impossible to get started again. So whatever you do, don't stop! After over 2 miles of successful but no doubt frightening travel, the Germans misjudged a road fork and went right when the road in fact veered left, thus sealing their fate. This put them in a right side tributary of the wash. It appears they realized this, and tried to cut back left to join the main road (or what passed for it) and got stuck in the sandy, gravelly area in between. Given the nature of the wash, use of a compact spare would not have provided them with much benefit, what with two other flat tires.

At this point they entered into a survival situation, but may not have fully appreciated that fact. The temperature, which peaked that day on the valley floor at 124 degrees, was maybe 104 at their elevation, at this late time in the day. Hot, but not necessarily lethal. Their main concern might have been suddenly realizing they needed to have their van back in LA in just a few more days and meet their flight. They clearly needed to find someone to help them extract their vehicle.

The site evidence suggests someone, probably Egbert, traveled 1.7 miles easterly down Anvil Canyon and drank a beer under a bush while sitting on the ground. The size of the

"butt prints" suggest it was a large person, and thus Egbert. The location of the bottle and prints, on the easterly side of the bush, suggest it was providing shade during the very late afternoon. From this location is possible to see easterly down canyon to the mouth of Anvil Canyon (about 8 miles) and all the way to the east side of the main valley where the paved Badwater Road is (about 16 miles). It also is a good spot to formulate a plan of action.

The Germans were stranded in a spot in which they needed the help of others to extricate their vehicle and thus be able to make their flight back home. Given the information available to them, where could they best find it? It is likely they had gone the entire day without seeing another human, so their entry route offered little hope of others. In examining their maps, Ballarat was many miles away, and with unknown services. Furnace Creek, with everything they needed, was far to the north, out of their reach. Even the paved Badwater Road on the valley's east side had only intermittent traffic and was in a zone of lethal heat. But there was another possibility….

Remember that the Germans were new to the desert southwest and unfamiliar with things that to some of us are so obvious we don't even realize we take them for granted. The Germans had likely seen many military installations in Europe, and they had certain commonalities. **They all had fences which were regularly patrolled by armed personnel.** From Egbert's perspective and knowledge pool, the likelihood of patrols or sentries at the edge of a military installation would have seemed quite high. Egbert, looking at the maps available to him, would have seen the northern boundary of the China Lake Naval Weapons Center (NWC) to be only about 8 or 9 miles to the south of them. This was about the same distance he could see from his resting spot to the mouth of Anvil Canyon, which does not appear that distant, and only half of that to Badwater Road. Also from the same resting spot, looking to the south shows what appears to be a simple traversable route south, up over a low pass in the mountains. It would be easy to imagine cresting the hills he was looking at to the south and seeing the safety of a military installation just a few miles further. Plus, instead of descending down into lethal heat, they would have been able to stay high at lesser temperatures. It would seem a clever and reasonable idea.

Of course we who have seen US desert military installations know that there are seldom fences, and few, if any patrols. Security is provided more by vastness rather than fencing. But someone from Germany would not know that. That is what we know that Egbert

didn't.

After formulating his plan at the bottle bush, Egbert headed back to the van. The group then probably spent the night at the van (a stay of some duration was evidenced by the presence of the fecal material in dug holes) and then early the next morning locked the vehicle and headed east down Anvil Canyon to a little past the bottle bush, then turned south toward the China Lake NWC boundary in hope of rescue. Having been at the Stone Cabin, they would have seen Anvil Spring and known of the presence of water and shelter only 4 miles behind them. But they chose not to avail themselves of this, because they didn't feel they were in a survival situation, felt time pressure due to their travel plans and were confident enough they would come across soldiers who could help them with their predicament. The Stone Cabin, while offering water and shelter, offered no immediate means of extrication for them, and they could miss their flight.

There is a rather famous saying from Sherlock Holmes:

> "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth"

In other words, at this point given the amount of expert searching already performed, the probability of the Germans being found in Anvil Canyon, between Anvil Canyon and Warm Spring or in the main valley was very low. The inescapable conclusion therefore is that they must be somewhere that **hasn't been yet searched**. And that would be South.

What route or routes might they have used? The topography constrains such that there are really only three north-south drainages easterly of Squaw Spring of varying degrees of obviousness. As one travels east down Anvil Canyon the most pronounced route is almost opposite the Bottle Bush. That's not to say they couldn't have headed south directly from the van, but the range of mountains immediately south do appear intimidating. Besides, Egbert would have already seen the apparent pass beyond Squaw Spring.

About 2 miles southerly of Squaw Spring, one reaches the edge of a high valley (actually it appears to be more a combination of alluvial fans). This "valley" is a rectangle about 1.5 miles N/S and about 2 miles E/W. On the southerly edge there's a rim of hills before it drops down into a vast vista across the Wingate Wash area and into China Lake NWC,

where there is little to be seen. This range of hills provides the first clear view of what lies ahead. Upon reaching this upper alluvial fan area, and not immediately seeing a military facility, the party may have started to realize their error, that it was indeed a survival situation and paused. Egbert may have left Conny and the kids at some sheltered locale and proceeded onward in search of help, never to return. This scenario suggests reconsideration of the sleeping bag found near the AT&T relay tower and the "German canteens" allegedly found between Needle Peak and Sugarloaf.

So in summary, this incident could have been the result of a series of honest mistakes or minor lapses in judgment. Further, Egbert was a smart guy and the prospect of salvation via a military facility could well have occurred to him, drawing them all into a no-win situation. We knew where they were not. They must be somewhere that hasn't been searched. Up until now, there hasn't been shown any compelling reason why they would turn south. It looked like it was time to have a closer look in that direction.

Next installment....

Or back to the Hunt for the Death Valley Germans main page